PATTERNS OF EXISTENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL INSPIRATIONS, HISTORICAL INFLUENCES, AND MOTIVATIONS

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PATTERNS OF EXISTENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL INSPIRATIONS, HISTORICAL INFLUENCES, AND MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract

For my Honors Alternative to Thesis Project, I proposed to create a solo exhibition of my artwork and research the inspiration behind my paintings. I found that my influences range from the artists of the Dutch Baroque Period to the American Realist artists such as Andrew Wyeth, Winslow Homer, and Edward Hopper. I explore these ideas because I am fascinated with the mysteries of the natural world. My paintings are contemplations on personal ephemeral moments I experience. My exhibition, paper, and talk highlight the parts of my background that have influenced my artwork, my artist statement, the research I have done on my historical inspirations, discussion of contemporary artists, and descriptions of the influences and progression behind select work in my portfolio. In this project, I analyzed how my artwork has evolved over the past few years, and I learned the direction my work is taking both conceptually and formally.

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Introduction

My roots are in Pine Mountain, Georgia. The town is a small remote place surrounded by miles of deciduous forests. The childhood home where I grew up was on FDR State Park, where my father was the Senior Park Ranger. The early years of my life were filled with hiking, watching animals, and making watercolors of what I saw in my environment. Most of my artwork was of the local landscape or of the animals within it, especially birds. They have always fascinated me because of their ability to transcend the world that we inhabit, and this fascination has not left me. I also grew up visiting art museums across the South Eastern United States. My enchantment was strongest in nineteenth century paintings and contemporary realism. To my young mind, it was incredible that an oil painting could capture an entire atmosphere of mood and emotion. I began to paint in earnest, and I am still pursuing the techniques of painting and drawing today.

When I began school at Columbus State University, I was challenged to try many new and different media. I enjoyed learning about all of them, but painting and drawing are still the most true to my nature. Thankfully, CSU has provided an environment that has challenged me to think more conceptually and to use interdisciplinary approaches to my thoughts. My education was pushed further when I met the artist Bo Bartlett three years ago. He has taken me under his wing and has given me invaluable instruction involving skill, knowledge, and concept. His paintings have a deep influence on my life and work. Bo's paintings find the significance in the mundane and the universal narrative in the everyday. His still life paintings move beyond being a mere representation of an object and become metaphorical to the world around us. Bo Bartlett's

work taught me what it means to be alive and to be human. I believe to some extent, I am interested in pursuing goals similar to these as a result of that connection.

As I began making this work, I used my personal history and education to fuel my inspiration. I reflected on my past, and where I find meaning in life. I thought about painting from life in a more conceptual manner. What does it mean to paint something? Why do we paint? To paint from life is to show reverence of the otherwise ordinary, and perhaps art stems from the pursuit of meaning in life. The act of observation becomes a way of an appreciating the object being observed. I thought about the materials I used, and how they impact our reading of the work. As a painter, the way in which something is painted precedes my perception of the subject. I used these reflections as a guide to move forward into a new body of work.

SECTION 1

Artist Statement

When I look into the world, I see patterns of existence present in natural and man-made forms. In a square foot of earth, there is an entire ecosystem present of organisms being born, living, eating, dying, and decomposing. On the other hand, something as simple as a sheet of paper has a narrative of its own. The paper has a point of creation and a life, but it is also finite. As an artist, my goal is to capture this universal reality in my work. I process these ideas through direct observation of the world, and by trying to understand my experience within it.

My historical influences range from the artists of the Dutch Baroque Period to the American Realist artists such as Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper, and Winslow Homer. These artists inspire me because of the meaning they assigned to the mundane whether it be still life or landscape. I explore these ideas because I am fascinated with the ontological mysteries of the world, and what it means to be aware of one's own environment. My paintings are contemplations on personal ephemeral moments I experience. In this, I find a questioning of what it means to be alive, including both the wonder of existence and fragility of life. I do not try to answer these questions, only present a moment for the viewer to participate in the time spent painting. I want them to feel the hours I spent studying the subject with past, present, and future thoughts encapsulated within the painting.

Gerhard Richter stated that he is most interested in that which he does not understand, and that he did not like the things that he did understand.[1] I believe that this is true for me as well, in that I am fascinated by philosophical questions that are impossible to answer, such as spirituality, the life cycle, reality, time, death, and infinity.

I believe this questioning began a long time ago in my life. When I was about eight, I often walked through the woods alone, to explore new areas and create stories about the places I found. There was one cloudy day when I was pleasantly walking along when suddenly at the base of my feet, a large carcass was spread out before me. It was full of bones, organs, and matted fur. The creature was five times my size, and I was so full of shock and adrenaline, I could not comprehend what lay on the ground before me. I sprinted breathlessly back to my home to tell my father, and he went back to find it. He returned and told me that it was a deer, and he went and got a saw from the garage to cut off the antlers. He set these on top of an ant hill, and for a period of two weeks, I watched them become cleaner and cleaner. I still have them today as a reminder of my first encounter with death and the natural cycles that surround mortality. They fascinate me because the antlers are all that remain of the deer that once roamed the earth.

This event relates to my work conceptually because I am always exploring the grey line between permanence and fragility. Often the impressions or remains of a history, interaction, or life spark my engagement with a subject. When I sit and observe an object, I imagine its possible past and future. I paint the tiny characteristics that make it unique, and give hint to its past.

Evolution of Ideas

Students often have a difficult time choosing a subject for their work. Personally, I do not believe that a subject should be chosen arbitrarily. I believe a person's work should reflect his or her true nature and beliefs. I believe that the best way to evolve as an artist is to constantly make artwork. Only when you are in a process do you move to the next step. Retrospectively, this is a great way to analyze the evolution of ideas. Both my work and my environment influences what I am working on, and looking back over the past few years, I can see how I arrived at my current body of work.

When I began working with Bo Bartlett in the summer of 2014, he had me draw from life everyday. He wanted me to use white objects in natural light so that I could see tonality in my subject. I worked on these studies for a period of six months, and eventually graduated to monochromatic oil studies. The paintings and drawings were often of shells or skulls (Figure 1). To me, I could see an entire history recorded on the surface of the object before it had come into my possession. I found myself sitting for hours before them, analyzing each and every characteristic. I believe this work not only taught me to draw and see form, but had an influence on what I was interested in conceptually in my work.

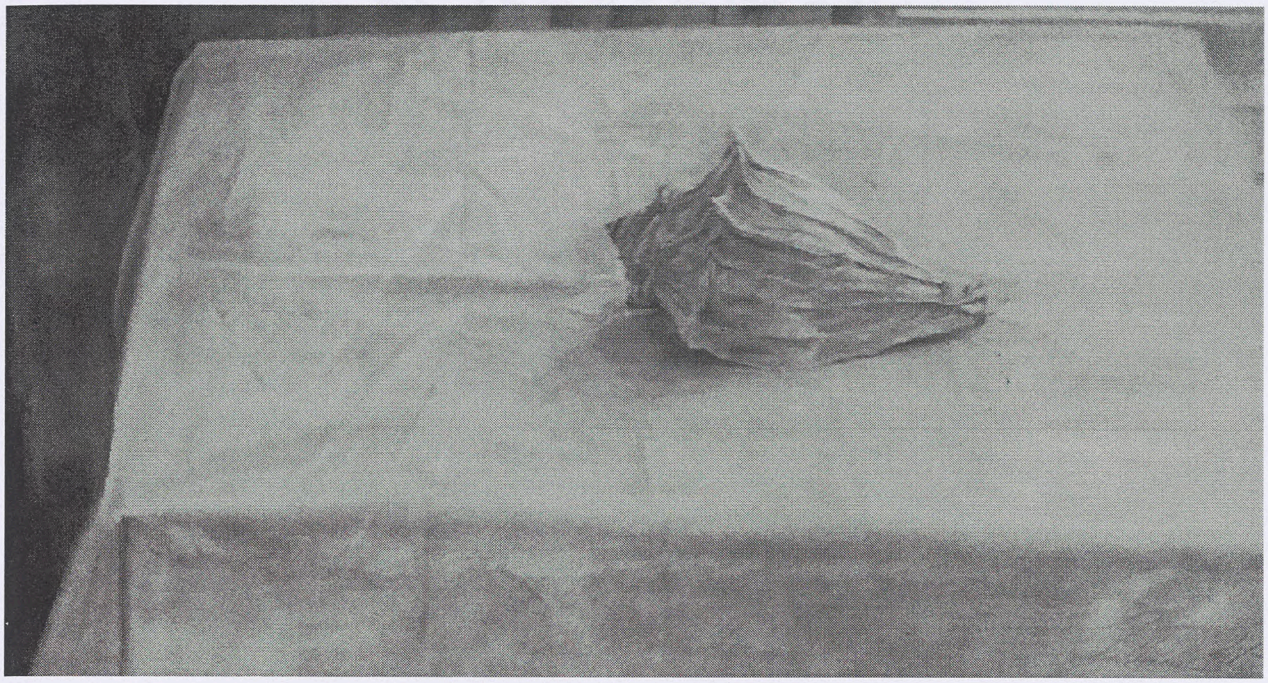

Figure 1. Julianna Wells, *Shell Study #1*, graphite on paper, 20" x 30" in, 2014.

As I started taking painting classes at CSU, I began to search for my subject. My first paintings were of figures in imagined landscapes. I asked my friends to pose for these paintings, and I placed them in these psychological wooded landscapes. The effect felt very whimsical, and so I reduced my compositions in pursuit of naturalism. At the same time, Bo began working with me on how to paint a figure from life from the under painting to the over painting. These attempts felt clumsy at first, but I was learning.

I eventually started painting objects in the landscape as if they were figures. I called them personal monuments because of their structure and significance to me metaphorically. The first was a painting of a tree stump that I did from life (Figure 2). My father had cut the tree down, and I was fascinated with what remained. To me, no matter what event happened in life, the stump is a symbol of the regeneration of life. It is a vessel for new life to emerge. Lichen, moss, and termites can live off of it. Some trees even sprout from the roots depending on the species. The second painting was one of a fireplace (Figure 3). This was the site of an old homestead a

mile from the house where I grew up. In the painting, I removed it from the woods and placed it on top of Pine Mountain. To me, the painting talks about both personal and collective history, a monument to what was. I believe these pieces were a turning point in the kind of work I wanted to make because I started to focus on the significance of the object.

Figure 2. Julianna Wells, *Personal Monuments Series*, oil on canvas, 36" x 36" in, 2015.

Figure 3. Julianna Wells, *Personal Monuments Series,* oil on panel, 36"x 48" in, 2015.

During the summer of 2015, I visited Italy. We stayed in the city of Florence, and this had an impact on my drawings. While I was there, I drew from the statues everyday. I loved how quiet they were. The white marble contained a heroic beauty, and the feeling came across in my studies. I believe this is part of where I found my inspiration for the stillness I seek to have in my paintings. I also saw the Venice Biennale. There were artists from all over the world making art about where they were from and current issues that impacted them. I began to question what was most important to me about where I lived.

I decided that it must be the Georgia landscape, and I began to make work about that. I became very minimalistic and interested in land art. I started using actual Georgia red clay to

make artwork for the course of a semester. This exploration showed me my true interests. Eventually, I realized that I was not a minimalistic or land artist, but that I felt more fulfilled by oil painting.

Figure 4. Julianna Wells, *Alstroemeria*, oil on panel, 48"x 64" in, 2015.

I returned to painting and tried to incorporate the same ideas into my work. At first I made very elaborate compositions with figures in the landscape such as *Alstroemeria* (Figure 4). This felt a little bit too whimsical and so I began a second painting, a self-portrait on top of pine mountain (Figure 5). This also felt unreal, and so after many critiques, I took the figure out of the painting. In a way, the removal felt very conceptual because I had just moved from there to Columbus. I had both literally and figuratively removed myself from the landscape.

Figure 5. Julianna Wells, *Home*, oil on canvas, 64" x 72" in, 2016.

I was accepted into the New York Academy of Art's Summer Undergraduate Program during the summer of 2016. While I was there, I received a studio to work in, took multiple classes, and visited museums and galleries. Much of the work I saw influenced my current direction. These influences included the Hudson River School, Monet's large scale works, Odd Nerdrum's solo exhibition, and much of the Dutch Baroque still life and landscape paintings. I began making work that was based more on observation and reflective of natural processes, and the spiritual meaning that can be found in them. These experiences lead me to my current body of work. The themes and styles I had been experimenting with and observing began to come together into a cohesive portfolio.

SECTION TWO

2.1 Project Description

In my alternative to thesis project, I explore my artwork through the multiple lenses of my interests. These inspirations come from art history and personal history. The research was presented in conjunction with an exhibition of six to eight works of art including paintings, drawings, and multi-media works. The location of the exhibition was in the Artlab gallery from February 4th to February 9th. I gave the defense of my thesis in conjunction with the exhibition being hung. The defense was presented in the multipurpose classroom of the Seaboard depot. A public reception was held for the thesis exhibition after the private defense was given. An artist statement accompanied the exhibition as well.

The defense highlighted the parts of my background that have influenced my artwork, my artist statement, the research I have done on my historical inspirations, discussion of contemporary artists, and descriptions of the influences and progression behind each of the paintings in the exhibition. The defense also gave an account of how my work has evolved over the past few years, and I discussed the direction my work is taking both conceptually and formally.

2.2 Process, Materials, and Methods.

Most of my painting and drawing is done from life. I am captivated with the real time interaction between the artist and the environment. According to Tibetan Buddhist principals, everything is in a constant state of flux or change, and I am fascinated with this when observing my subject.[2] The colors, lines, and light are constantly shifting in the world and it is the artist's decision to choose what to record in their art. I find that the metamorphosis that occurs as the object is observed and then drawn to be much more interesting than trying to reproduce a photograph. There is a distortion that naturally occurs from the way we see something to how the hand does not always capture what is in the mind. Even though I often try to imitate an object the best that I can, this set of factors always create a noticeable difference from the physical object to the rendering of it. I use photographs in the development of my work because they are an aid to memory. The subject or light is not always there, or I might need to use a photograph to help invent part of the painting.

In drawing, I am most fascinated with the roughness of the graphite or charcoal on the paper. The relationship between the pigment and tooth of the paper is subtle and fascinating, and the record of mark making is very clear. I had a similar feeling when drawing on the stone for lithography printing. When I am painting, this relationship is different for me. The brushstrokes cover the surface; so there is not the same relationship between the mark and the substrate, only mark on mark.

SECTION THREE

3.1 Inspirations

Much of my inspiration comes from my sense of place. Many people feel connected to the places that they live, and artists often find inspiration in that feeling. Andrew Wyeth said, "I think one's art goes as far and as deep as one's love goes. I see no reason for painting but that. If I have anything to offer, it is my emotional context with the place I live and the people I do [draw and paint]".[3] I sympathize with this statement. By depicting my surroundings and the people around me, I have given physicality to a set of things that are not physically tangible – grief, love, hope, and the reality of human existence.

In the still moment, I find a sense of peace. Painting that moment, especially directly from life, is like meditation. You become mindful of what your subject truly is as opposed to your perception of it. You analyze the parts that make the whole of the composition, and then you think about the ideas and feelings the image is bringing forth. In many cases, I feel that while my subjects are very concrete and realistic, the ideas they bring forth are quite abstract. One cannot touch human emotion, but we are all quite conscious of its existence.

I believe this is why self-reflection is such a big part of what drives my work. While I am painting still lives or landscapes, I feel as if they are all self-portraits. For a long time, my paintings were about the struggle of trying to express my ideas clearly through painting. Now I am driven by trying to understand what it means to be alive and the questioning that goes along with the process of living. I look for certain constants in the world to communicate these ideas. My subjects are often isolated, neutral, and imperfect. This lends a certain melancholy mood to the image.

3.2 Historical Influences

My paintings are constantly in conversations with paintings from the past. This is something that I learned from Bo. Watching him formulate paintings, I have often seen him lay out multiple books with paintings all relating to what he is currently working on. Looking at paintings that exist is a great way to find what you are interested in doing, and the feeling you want your own painting to convey. I find great inspiration in studying the paintings of history, not unlike how Seneca stated that men should be like bees. He believed we should digest the works of others and recycle what we learn in our own work similar how bees gather nectar from different flowers to blend into honey. The key is that whatever we do will still be original because we will blend these influences in a way that was different from what came before[4].

I relate strongly to American artists who painted what they saw in their individual worlds where they lived, but also to the Dutch Baroque painters who used natural objects as symbols and metaphors in their still lives. I believe that in my work, I am synthesizing these two historical types of expression into a more personal manifestation. The American Realists I am most interested in include the artists Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper, and Winslow Homer. It is the motives behind their work that fascinate me, as well as the ways in which they communicated moods and emotions through their individual scenes. Researching deeper into their ideas and connections to the land helps me understand my own connections to the place I was raised. The Dutch Baroque artists whose still life paintings inspired me include Jan Weenix, Franz Snyders, and Pieter Claesz. They used objects and dead game to allegorize the dynamics of the world around them. In the same way, I aim to read and reflect the transcendence of the environment around me.

A signature painting that I believe inspired most of the paintings in my exhibition would be Carel Fabritus's *The Goldfinch*, done in 1654. I saw this painting when I attended the traveling Dutch Master show at the High Museum in Atlanta in 2013. I was at first struck by the beauty of the painting. It was so simple, but yet incredibly illusionistic. I loved the central composition with the light colored background, and the cast shadow. Little did I know, these characteristics would make an appearance in my later work. I became further intrigued about the painting when I heard my instructor discuss it. The goldfinch is traditionally used throughout art history as a Christian symbol of the suffering of Christ. According to legend, the red on the European goldfinch's head found its origin when the little bird tried to remove the Crown of Thorns from Christ's head.[5] Blood fell on the bird's face, and Christ thanked him for his kindness, stating that he and all his kin would wear the red mark as a symbol of his compassion during Christ's suffering. Birds are a common symbol for the afterlife, when the soul takes flight from the body.[6] I was fascinated how such a realistic image could draw out such abstract and philosophical notions. This began my interest in Dutch still life paintings, and more specifically, paintings of birds.

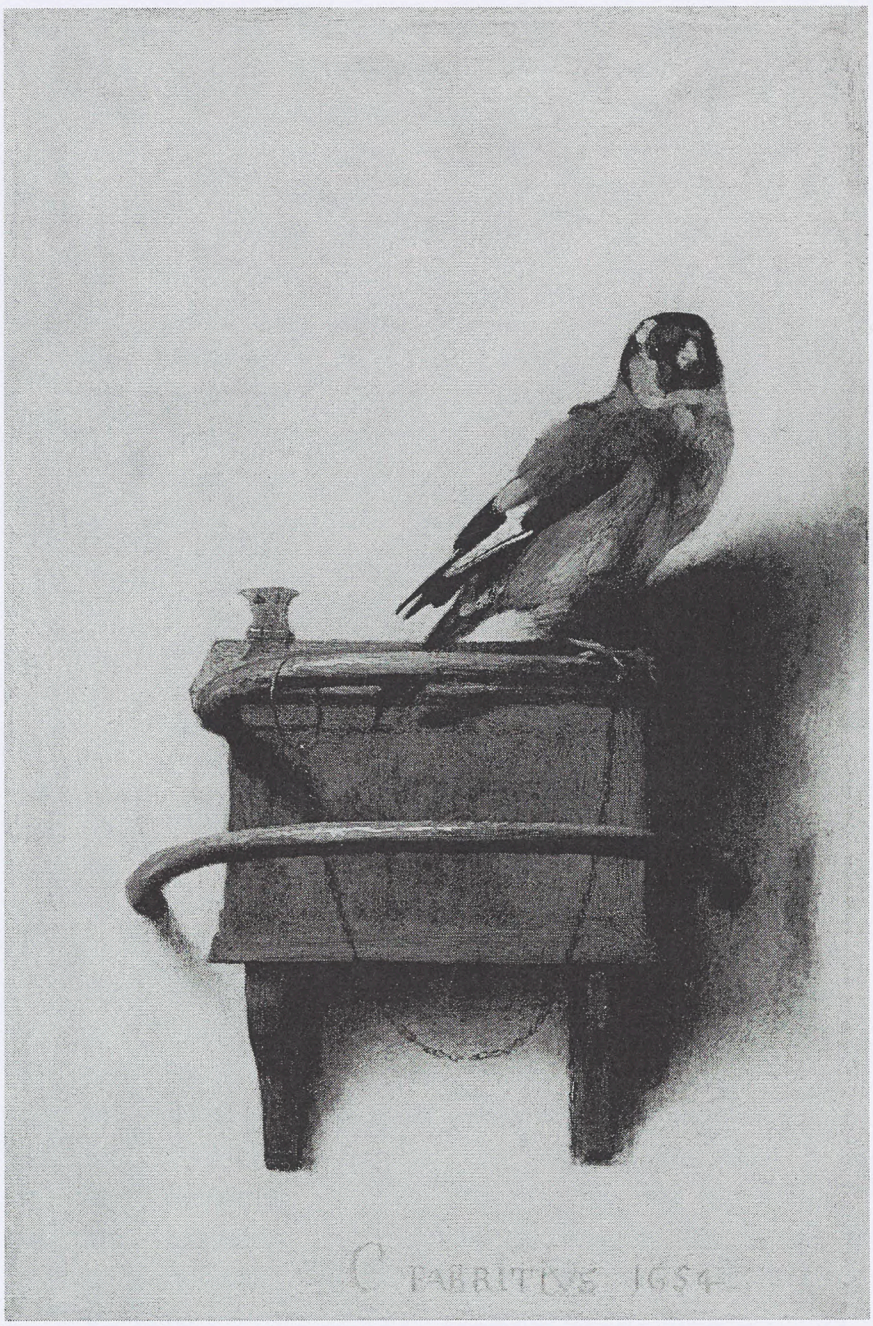

Figure 6. Carel Fabritus, *The Goldfinch*, oil on panel, 1654.

In the Dutch Baroque period, even though most paintings displayed the wealth of material goods of the merchant class, each object depicted in a still life had metaphorical and Christian meaning behind it.[7] The artists Jan Weenix, Franz Snyders, and Pieter Claesz in particular were part of a century long tradition of large game painting.[8] They made paintings of

dead animals piled another in a lush display of fur, feathers, and all things opulent about the hunt. An example of this is Jan Weenix's painting *Falconer's Bag* created in the year 1695 (Figure 7). These paintings could solely be about the rich's attitude toward anthropocentrism and man's rule over animals.[9] "Trophy paintings" as they are called are also statements on national pride.[10] Traditionally, only the landowner had the right to hunt the animals on his estate. However, with freedom from Spanish Tyranny, the Dutch were now all owners of the land and all had the right to hunt the animals that lived on it.

Figure 7. Jan Weenix, *Falconer's Bag*, 1695.

At the same time, it could also be argued that the paintings could be viewed in a more metaphorical sense as statements of life. Personally, I believe that the trophy paintings are also paintings that deal with the concept of *Vanitas*. An excellent example of the *vanitas* theme is Harmen van Steenwyck's *A Still Life of Dead Birds and Fruit, 1650* (Figure 8). Steenwyck's still life paintings contain objects such as skulls, timepieces, fruit, and dead fowl, all of which are symbols of the transience of life. Such paintings are also known as a *memento mori* or reminders of death.[11] The juxtaposition of the dead birds and the live bird in *A Still Life of Dead Birds and Fruit* particularly talk about the line between life and death. In the same way, I think the beauty and lack of bloodshed in trophy paintings, like Jan Weenix's *Falconer's Bag,* investigate the fragility of being mortal, and the tragic beauty of the life cycle.

Figure 8. Harmen van Steenwyck, *A Still Life of Dead Birds and Fruit,* 1650.

In my own paintings, I borrowed the idea of the dead avian figure. I seek to employ a similar sort of grace in death, along with the metaphors associated with the bird. I often pin my birds as a way suspending them in time. If the bird is a representation of the soul or afterlife, what does it mean to trap them? Perhaps it is a questioning of the way we are conscious of our own mortality.

In much the same way, I believe the American Realists were able to communicate through their depictions of landscapes, still lives, and portraits. They were able to take what was familiar to them, and use their own imagery as a point of origin for metaphor.

Andrew Wyeth painted his home Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, through the course of his entire life.[12] The hills and buildings in just a few square miles held so much meaning to him, especially after his father died on top of the hill near his house. His father was the famous illustrator N.C. Wyeth, but Andrew Wyeth rejected the adventurous action filled stories his father depicted, instead expressing quieter subjects with a more neutral palette.[13] His primary subjects were the ordinary people living around him, domestic life in his home, and the rusticly poetic nature of the land in which he lived.[14] The 1947 painting *Wind from the Sea* is a perfect example of how Wyeth could imbue significance into what seems to be a mundane subject (Figure 9). The billowing curtains reference something more mysterious and ethereal both figuratively and literally. The window seems to symbolize a transition point. The viewer looks out of the window at the road leading the eye further into the landscape, while the curtains blow inside to the viewer's space. His media are watercolor and egg tempera. These media allowed him to depict the detail of the world with crisp short strokes that rhythmically captured the objects and landscapes he observed. Wyeth would sometimes work scenes from several angles

blended into one, and these distortions would widen the viewer's eye and create a feeling of omnipresence.

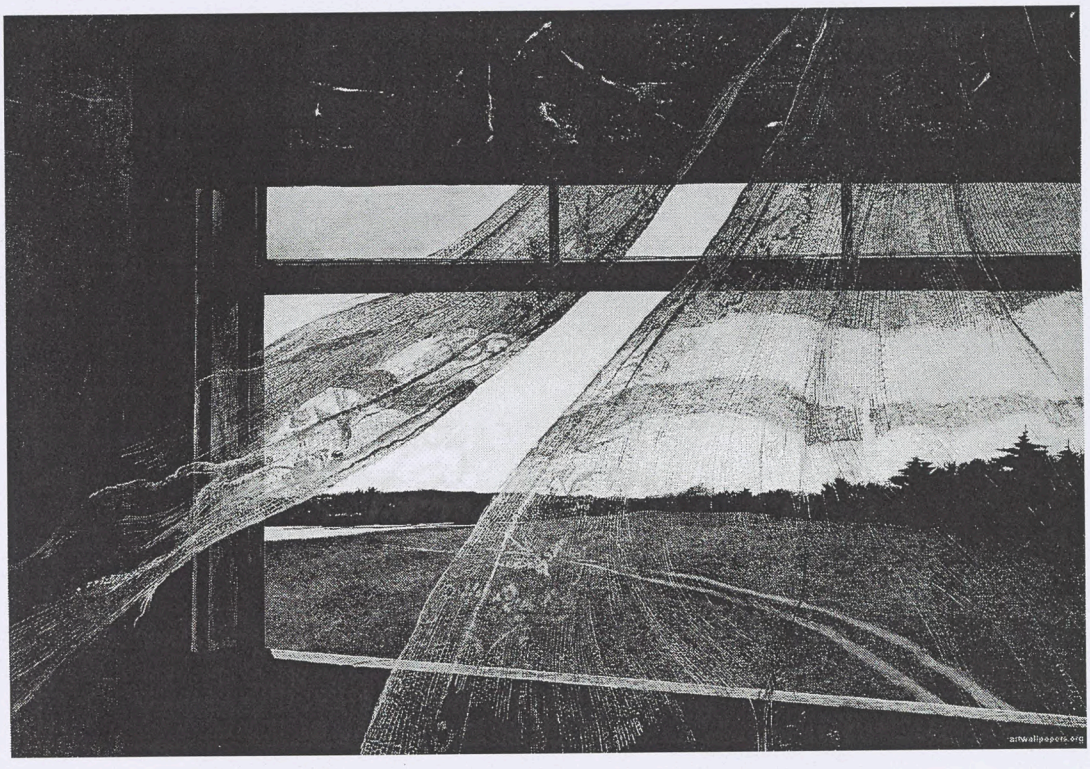

Figure 9. Andrew Wyeth, *Wind from the Sea*, 1947.

I am drawn to Andrew Wyeth's paintings because they are so reductive and yet filled with detail at the same time. He knows how to focus on the parts of the composition that really matter, and he renders these in an almost obsessive way. He uses tiny brushstrokes each placed precisely to depict every detail of the surface. I believe his earth-toned palette gives his paintings a greater naturalism because the paintings become more monochromatic like a sepia photograph. This limited palette also mutes colors in the painting, creating a somber or almost mournful mood that is poetic in nature.

One of Andrew Wyeth's inspirations was another artist who felt a similar connection to his sense of place.[15] Winslow Homer traveled during his younger years as an artist to make paintings depicting life of the soldiers during the Civil War and to make prints for Harper's

Weekly.[16] However, in about 1879, he settled in Prout's Neck, Maine, and isolated himself completely,[17] possibly as a result of a disappointing love affair. His studio and home were near the beach, and much of his subject matter arose from things he could see out his window or find near his studio. He chose to keep people away from his studio, and seemed to do this because he wanted to control his working environment. He is known to have stated about his home that, "the life that I have chosen gives me my full hours of enjoyment for the balance of my life. The Sun will not rise, or set, without my notice, and thanks".[18] By living this type of lifestyle, he was able to get the heart of what made that place so important for him and to get that emotion down in the paint.

Figure 10. Winslow Homer, *Right and Left*, 1909.

I really respect Winslow Homer's personal isolation, and use of neutral tones in his paintings. I believe that by alienating himself, he was able to focus on his own emotions and see them reflected in the land around him. There is a painting of his called *Right and Left* (Figure

10), in which I have found great inspiration.[19] The painting depicts two birds at sea, and one is falling, the other flying. In the distance, behind the flying bird's leg, a hunter is seen in a boat (Figure 11), a flash of red indicating that he has just fired a gun. To me, the painting becomes a statement about the instant between death and life. This is similar to how the Dutch vanitas paintings would juxtapose living animals with dead ones. The paint has a quick impressionistic quality that supports the idea of the fleeting moment between life and death. I found a lot of inspiration in this painting for my print *Deposition* (Figure 17). Both use a bird as a message about fragility of life.

Figure 11. Detail of Winslow Homer, *Right and Left*, 1909.

Edward Hopper is another American painter who painted his environment the way in which he saw it. He traveled to Europe and tried to paint like the Impressionists, but it was an imitation. It was only by coming back to America and painting the world as he saw it that he had his first real success in the 1950s.[20] He would often shift the composition of buildings and the environment to fit his melancholy and isolated style. He addressed both cityscapes and landscapes, and in both, he used striking graphic light to create a mood of uncanny disquiet.[21]

The paintings of the areas in which he lived and worked are much more powerful than the ones he did in Europe. This can be attributed to his understanding and connection to places familiar to him, as well as to the original way in which he depicted them. His works are never purely documentary; rather, he manipulated a scene so that it was both real and idealized at the same time. [23] The generalization of the subject matter causes a blankness that we are unfamiliar with in real life, but we are able to project our own experiences into the bareness.

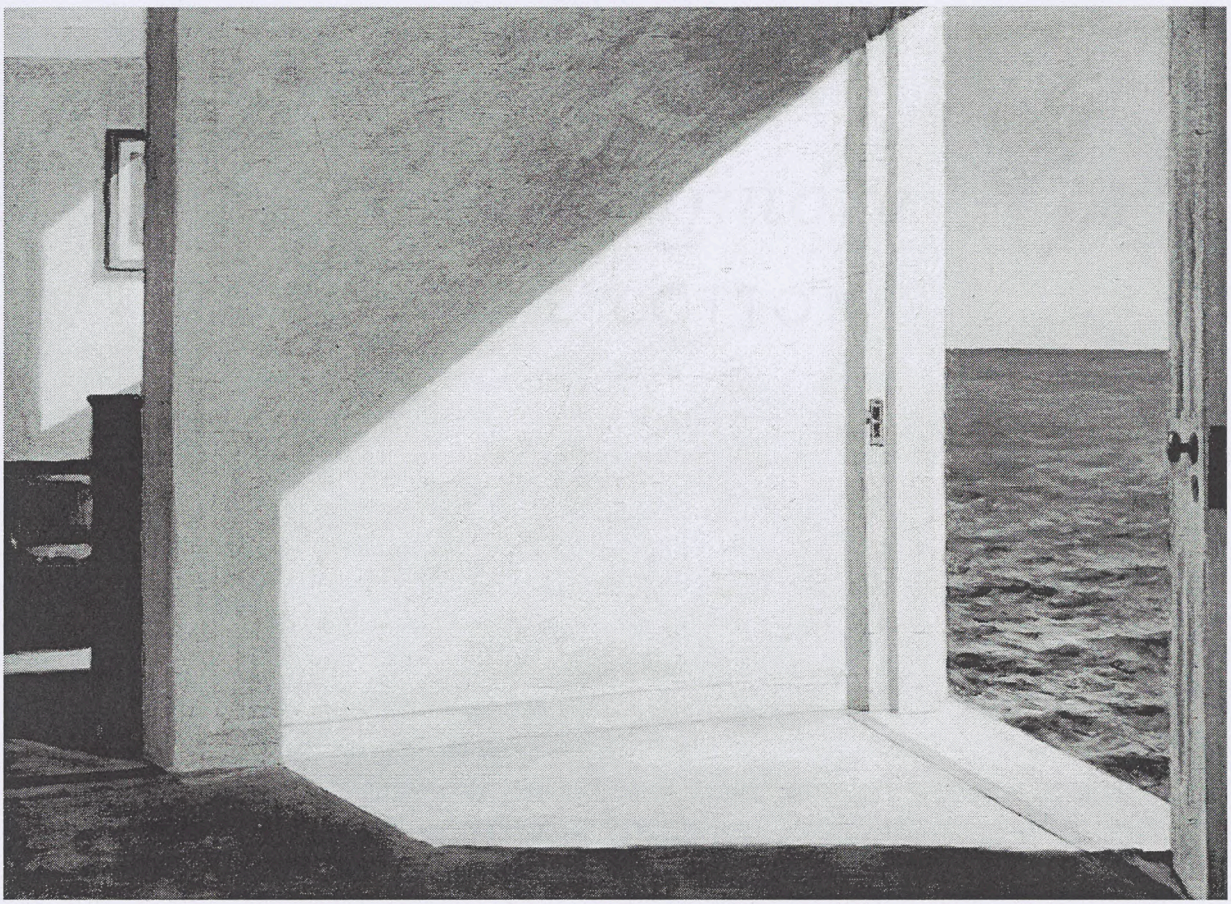

Figure 12. Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea*, oil on canvas, 1951.

I seek a similar sort of manipulation and minimalism. When seeing Hopper's paintings in person, they are very quiet and reserved, and the paint is very solid and opaque. I am attracted to the reduction of the scene to only the essential elements. I believe this enables Hopper's narratives to grow in his paintings. The "blankness" of his works allows the viewer to supply

missing information by drawing from his or her own memories and life experiences. I seek to use this type of technique when things that have a lot of information and detail. I feel it is more important to paint simply and control the viewer's focus with selective detail while maintaining an equally important consistency of the paint, as Hopper did.

These artists found their own autobiography in the world that surrounded them. The way they depicted their environments reflects upon each artist in turn, as well as what they chose to paint. Towards the end of his life, Homer made striking paintings of strife at sea, and moments of life, death, and some sort of in-between. Many critics wonder if there was a traumatic event in his life that pushed him to make those paintings.[23] However, the landscape doesn't necessarily need to be grand and epic to evoke wonder. The most seemingly ordinary tree or rock could inspire the work of an artist if they saw something in it that excited them.[24]

Part of what allowed these artists to paint their life so well, was the way in which they worked within their environments. They found beauty in the moments that most would overlook. Hopper explained that, "great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world".[25] These situations are from their life and are very real to them. Some of this attitude is visible to the perceptive viewer. They are not trying to create dramas in the sense of history paintings; rather these artists are portraying the reality of life as they perceive it. This forthrightness allows the viewer to relate to the work, and read into it based on his or her own experiences.

Each artist differs in style, and these differences reveal how they felt about their surroundings. While Hopper distills the scene by stripping the details until it reaches the bare essence, Wyeth lets all of the detail combine to form the whole. Hopper's paring down of elements and stark use of light adds to the feeling of isolation and tension that is seen in his

paintings. This reflects his inner feelings about his setting, as he was not a very sociable person.[26] Wyeth's paintings with his small brushstrokes and neutral palette are very quiet and pensive, possibly reflective of his father's passing. His marks seem to be weighed down with meaning and the sacred. All of the attention to detail seems to show how much he cared for what he was painting. Homer lets his passion come across in brushstrokes thick with paint, and all of his angst and pain comes across in his fantastical seascapes.

My goal is for my drawings and paintings to reflect the way I feel about my place in the world. This could be sentimental, romantic, a longing, or mournful and pensive. I see my home as a transcendent place. I feel the past and present correlate in the record of history lost to the land. I grew up finding arrowheads, old homesteads, and bottles all in the same woods. I believe this is how I became interested in painting the concept of time. In many ways, I believe my paintings can serve as a vehicle for both emotion and universal ideas.

3.3 Contemporary Influences

There are quite a few contemporary painters also addressing the imagery of their home to show personal narrative and the human condition. A few I admire are my own mentor Bo Bartlett, and the Spanish painter Antonio Lopez Garcia. Both artists deploy their own methods of analyzing the world around them through painting.

Bo Bartlett is a realist painter in the American tradition. He studied with Ben Long, Nelson Shanks, and Andrew Wyeth.[27] His paintings are often highly narrative and are based on his past, his imagination, and current events. The paintings themselves feel real, but not quite possible. I am very interested in his still life paintings. In them, the simple object is able to say something grand because Bo gives them significance through the way he paints them. An excellent example is his painting *The End of Summer* (Figure 13). It is strongly reminiscent of Wyeth's painting *Ground Hog Day* (Figure 14). Bo's painting seems to be about the light coming in through the window. In many ways, we can relate to the rock on the windowsill, feeling the warmth of the light on our skin. One of the biggest things I have learned from Bo is to paint the essential elements of the scene without focusing on the details, because the idea of the object or form will convey the message the painter is trying to say.

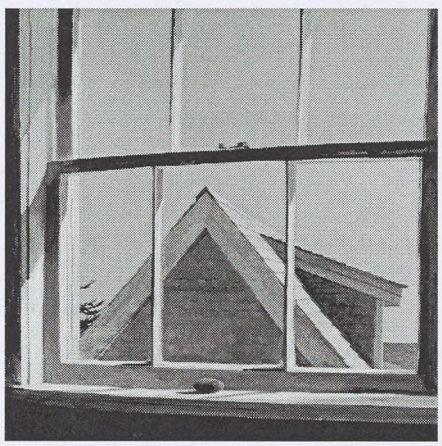

Figure 13. Bo Bartlett, *The End of Summer*, 2006.

Figure 14. Andrew Wyeth, *Ground Hog Day*, 1959.

Bo introduced me to the paintings of Antonio Lopez Garcia, and has often called him "the greatest living master". Garcia's paintings and drawings have a rough aesthetic. He follows in the European tradition of still life with game, landscape, and interior paintings.[28] The brutally honest application of paint gives a mood of deterioration and abject realism. I almost feel as if the paintings feel metaphysical in nature, because it is hard for the viewer to tell where they are in relationship to the subject, and whether or not they are involved. Antonio Lopez Garcia only works from life, through whatever conditions required. I am very inspired by the painting of the skinned rabbit. It becomes so realistic because of all the imperfections.

Figure 15. Antonio Lopez Garcia, *Skinned Rabbit*, oil on panel, 1972.

As I develop my work, I do my best to keep an eye out on the artists that inspire me, whether they are historical or contemporary. This way I am able to learn and grow into what I am interested in producing. By looking at the grand scheme of things, it also allows the artist to engage in a conversation with other artists both past and present.

SECTION FOUR

4.1 Exhibition Catalog

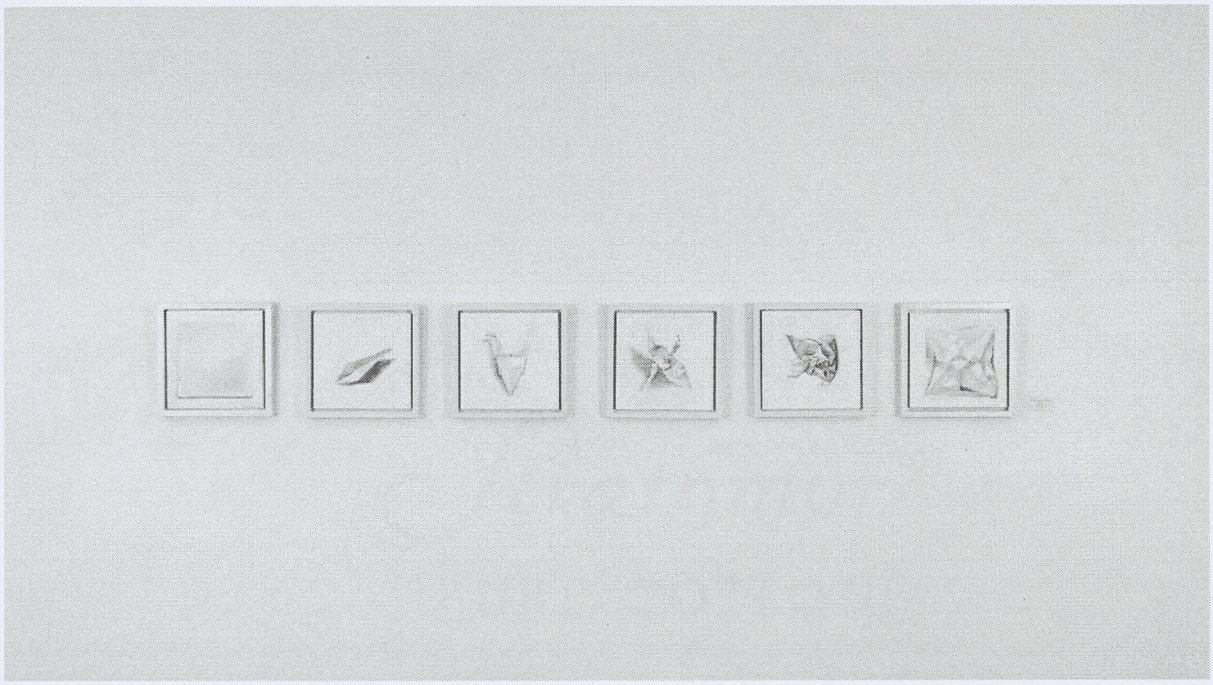

Figure 16. Julianna Wells, *The Making and Undoing*, six 12" x 12" inch panels, oil on panel, 2015.

This piece is a series of six one-foot square paintings depicting the metamorphosis of a square of white paper. The paintings are life studies of a process of formation and then deterioration of an origami crane. The series begins with a square blank sheet of paper with no folds. The next two have both been folded a bit more. The fourth is the goal or the pinnacle of the process, and it is the perfect origami crane. The fifth painting is of the same crane, but it has been worn down. In the sixth painting, the paper has come apart a bit, and the crane is no longer recognizable. In the last painting, the paper is once again square, but it holds the record of the folds and wrinkles that have occurred throughout the process of the creation and destruction of the crane.

I chose to paint origami because of the transience that is apart of what it is as a paper object. Paper is not everlasting. Origami is a symbol that I have been thinking about since I

returned from Japan in the summer of 2014. When I was prepping the panels, I was thinking about doing eight paintings of different origami folds, but that would not convey the message I wanted to send because those would just be studies of folded paper. I then thought about painting wrinkled paper, but that had the same issue. I began to think about the process and the life the paper takes on as it is used. That is how I arrived at depicting the paper as it is formed into something and how easily it can also be undone. The idea of that series to me conveyed the idea of transience. I want this impermanence of the paper to have a sense of humanity. It is meant to be a reflection of how when we are children, we are a blank sheet. Our parents slowly mold our character first. Then our experiences, teachers, and family influence us further. Eventually we reach the goal we meant to achieve. We become the perfect origami crane. Then things begin to wear on us, but we keep our shape. Some people might have a midlife crises. Eventually, when we get older, we return mentally to our childlike state. This is why the last painting is of the square of paper, but with all of the experiences left behind. It is a record of a life, whether it is good or bad. This is similar to wrinkles and scars that appear on skin.

The work also refers back to Dutch Vanitas still lives. The Latin word Vanitas refers to "vanity" and the ephemeral nature of all earthly things.[29] In the same way, that is what my series of paintings is trying to convey. Vanitas would use objects to portray symbolism and were often reminders of death. The paper itself is metaphorical because it was once the wood of a tree that was cut down. Like a wooden instrument in a vanitas still life, the paper also references a rebirth.

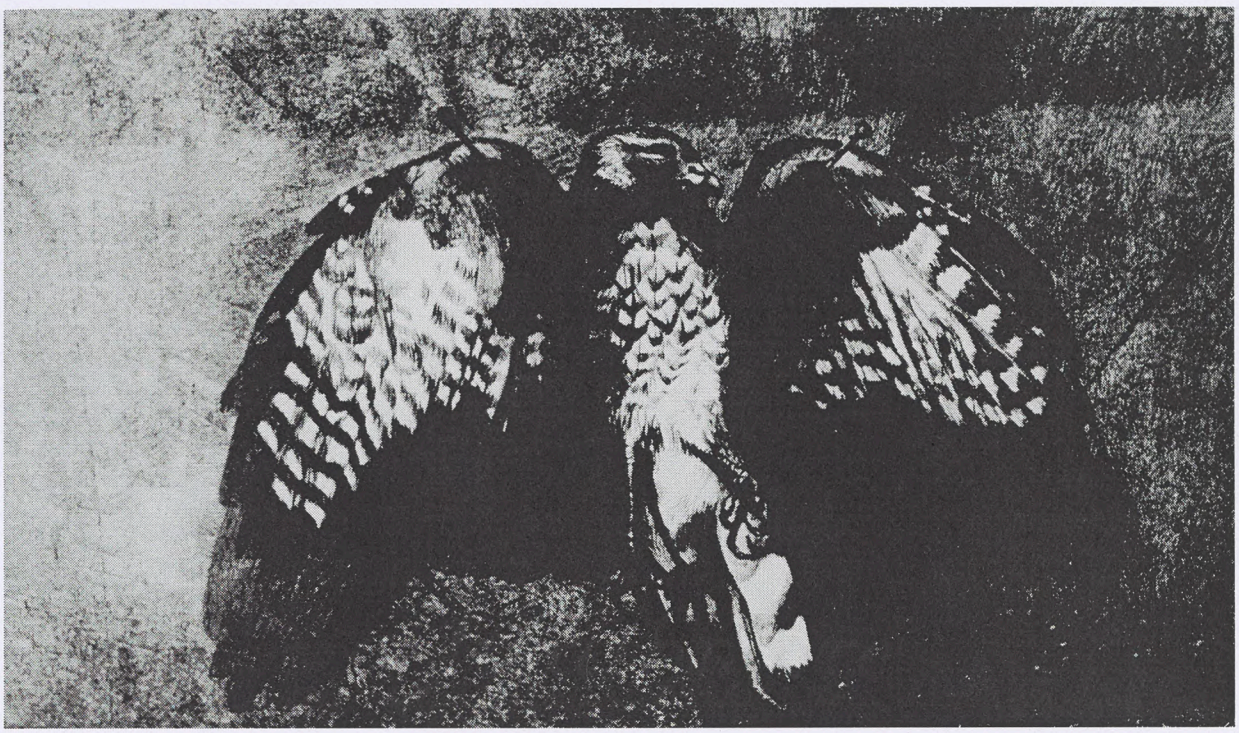

Figure 17. Julianna Wells, *Deposition*, 20" x 30" inches, lithograph, 2016.

During the spring of 2016, I made a lithography print entitled *Deposition.* The print depicts a red-tailed hawk nailed to a concrete wall. The hawk's head is turned to the side, and the eye is closed. The wings are spread in a manner similar to crucifixion. I had been working with imagery of the red-tailed hawk in painting, and depicting the bird with oil was not conveying what I wished it to because the birds were always too active. Trying the subject in a new medium shook things loose, and let me see the concept in a new way. I did not realize it at the time, but using the bird related back to the use of the bird in the origami paintings.

The piece was for an assignment. We were to create an image using the techniques of lithography. I quickly fell in love with drawing with grease on the stone. The mark making was very permanent, and was not merciful for mistakes. I had this idea for over a year, and believed this would be the best medium to try it out on. I chose a very large stone, because I thought that it would work best as close to life size as possible. Once I began working, it was easiest to draw

out of my head with a few references for specifics on proportion and specific details. I liked the idea of the stone being a very solid permanent feeling thing, but that it was also fragile and that one-day the image would be ground out of it. The fact that there would only be a limited set of paper prints felt very ephemeral, almost like the origami oil paintings.

The piece deals with a personal symbol of the red tailed hawk. For many years, I have seen the spotting of a hawk as a sign of being on the right path, and I have always given passing hawks a nod or salute of acknowledgment. As to the inspiration of this specific piece, this past year, there was a man in my apartment complex who had trapped and kept a hawk to use in falconry. This, to me, was reflective of my own creativity being trapped in daily life at that time. I pinned the hawk to the wall to distill it in a persecution like matter. I wanted it to seem either to be sleeping or dead. That it could wake up or resurrect, break free of its bonds and fly once more. Ironically, the weekend I chose to make my prints was during Easter. Prepping a stone to make lithographs is a three day process where the image itself disappears and comes back again during etching. I thought that this process and the content reflected the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, which is where the name *Deposition* emanated from.

This Christian theme is common in art history. I chose *Deposition* as a title because it reminded me of many of the European paintings depicting that part of the Christian saga, but I feel that the imagery more closely resembles the still lives of Frans Snyders or Jan Weenix. These oil paintings often used objects or dead animals as a *memento mori* or "reminder of death", but the vanitas also could symbolize other deeper metaphors such as the appreciation of life, resurrection, and . I am very interested in using the idea of the *memento mori* in both a personal and more contemporary way, and am currently exploring more possibilities.

Figure 18. Julianna Wells, *Reincarnation*, 20" x 30" inches, lithograph, 2016.

The inspiration for this print comes from a hike in which I discovered the carcass of a vulture with a Mountain Laurel beginning to grow from it. Seeing this imagery led me straight to this image as a direct form of reincarnation of natural objects. While the vulture is no more, its energy and matter is being recycled into the tree growing from it. I decided to make this image as a print because the greasy feathers reminded me of the tusche used in lithography, a greasy substance to paint with on the stone. Unlike *Deposition*, the images printed much darker. To me , the strong black silhouette with the imprint of the Mountain Laurel within references yin and yang. There can be no life without death. This idea also goes back to the cycle idea presented my my piece *The Making and Undoing*.

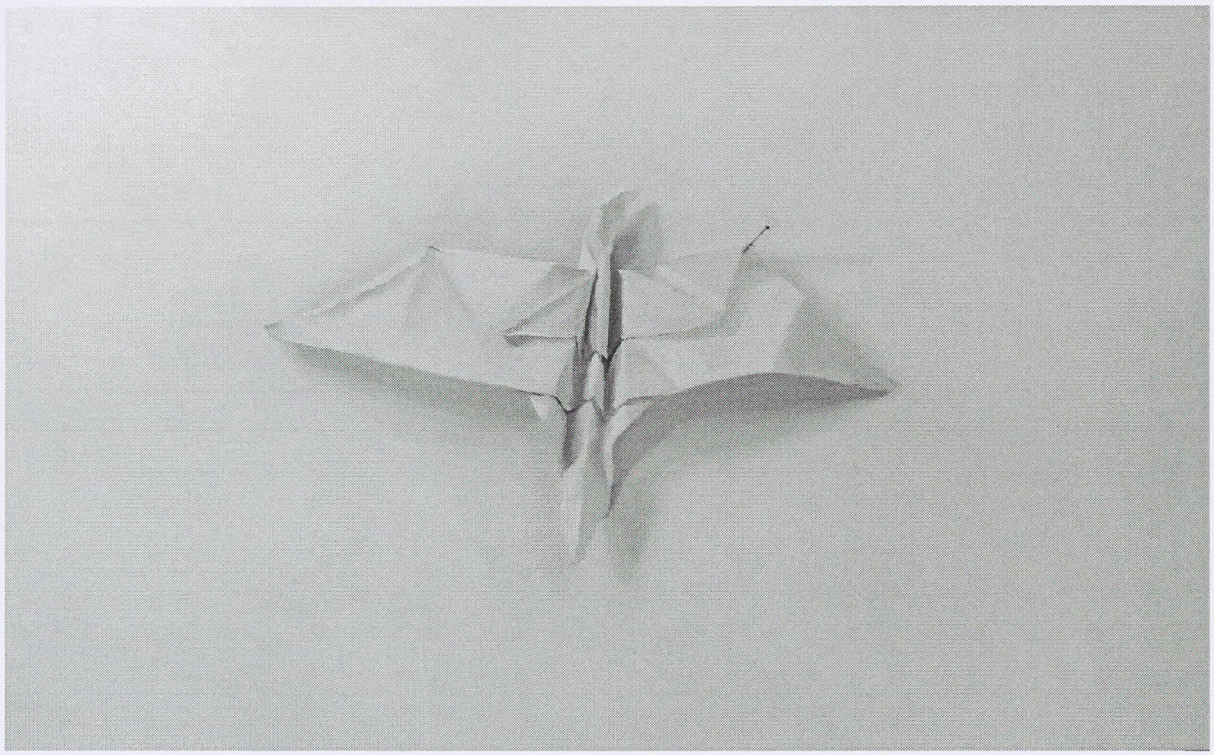

Figure 19. Julianna Wells, *Pinned down*, 24" x 12" inches, oil on panel, 2016.

In this painting, I combined my inspiration from the origami paintings and *Deposition*. By recreating the bird with paper, I feel as if I stripped away some of the subject matter that made the bird have more literal and religious implications. I feel as if in this version, the painting personifies an inanimate object, and yet there is a sense of struggle implied in the folds and wrinkles of the paper, as if it is fighting the pins holding it down. The pins make the bird feel as if it is a specimen. This connotes observation, experimentation, and documentation. The imagery also references traditional Dutch game painting because of the way birds were depicted in that time period. However, I believe making it with paper changes the meaning drastically because it is no longer a trophy.

One of my favorite moments in this painting is the tear on the left corner of the wing. It is something that happened in the process of creating the actual origami bird, and I decided to leave it in the painting because it shows just how fragile the bird is.

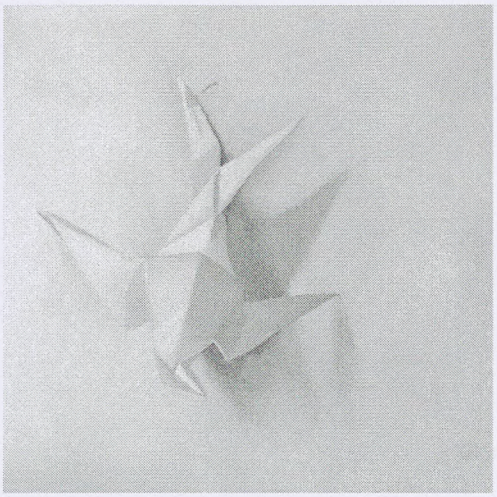

Figure 20. Julianna Wells, *Hanging Swallow*, 12" x12" inches, oil on panel, 2016.

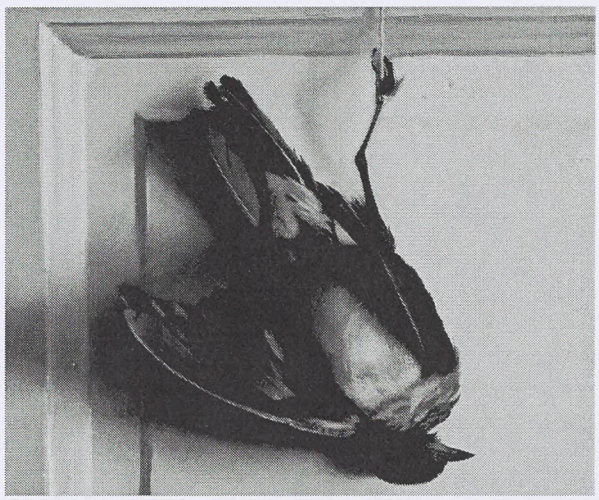

Figure 21. Bo Bartlett, *Passivity*, 11 x 9, oil on panel, 1979.

This painting is another version of *Pinned Down*. It deals with many of the same implications and meanings, but upright posture referencing crucifixion. Instead, I pinned the bird in a way that is more similar to the manner in which realist painters hang small birds to make studies. I believe this gives my painting a classical element, but it feels very contemporary because it is origami.

Figure 22. Julianna Wells, *Frozen in Flight*, 12" x 12" inches, oil on panel, 2016.

In this painting, I wanted to see what would happen if I replaced the origami bird with one that was handmade. The cutout wings create patterns of light and dark that imply movement, and they made the bird feel as if it could actually fly; however, the shadows underneath negate that feeling of flight by indicating a surface on which the bird has been placed. I believe that this painting references an action that occurred beforehand because of the wrinkles of the paper which reference both creation and manipulation into one picture. This process ultimately leads to destruction.

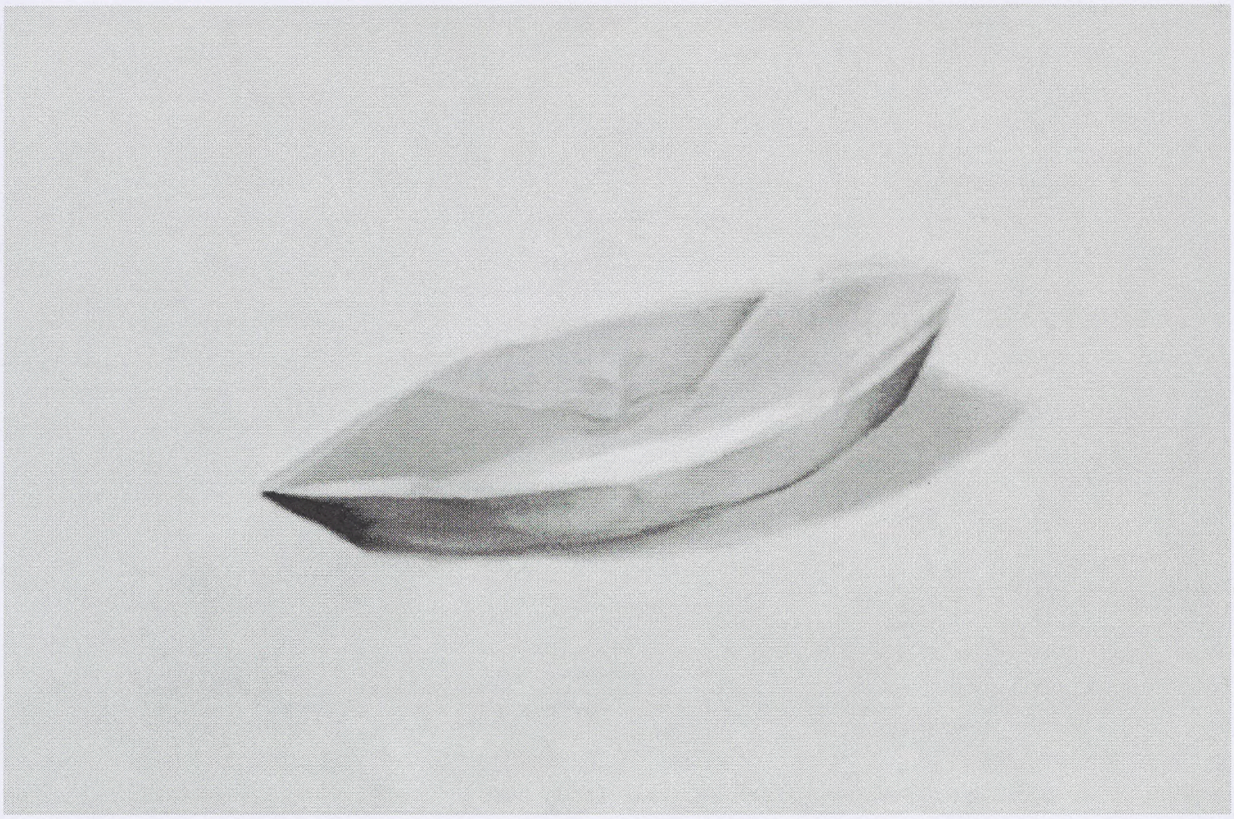

Figure 23. Julianna Wells, *Voyage*, oil on panel, 12" x 18" in, 2016.

In this painting, I am interested in the ambiguity of the future. We as humans are like small paper boats caught in the current. We are fragile objects caught in the flow of time. We cannot return to where we were before, we can only move forward into the future with no control over where it might lead. I believe that in this case, the white background plays a larger role in the narrative of the painting. It refers to both unpredictability of opportunities and an unknown future. Each of us will have our own unique experience on our journey through life, and reality is perceived differently by all of us.

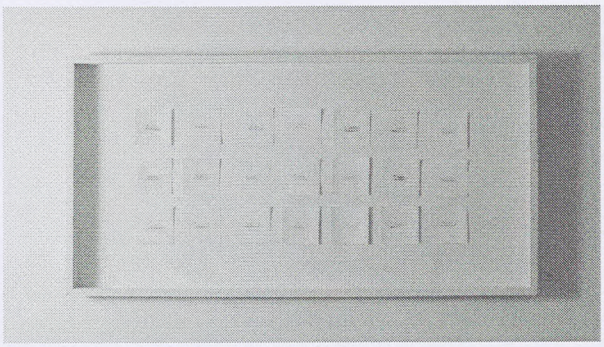

Figure 24 . Julianna Wells, *Obscure Fortunes*, mixed media, 6" x 6" in papers, 2016.

Figure 25. Julianna Wells, Detail of *Obscure Fortunes*

In this piece, I sought another way to work with paper in a manner similar to how I was using the origami. Fortune cookies are almost always positive about what will happen in your future. This is similar to how we think about our own futures. We like to imagine that everything will be better, not worse. I used the paint to blur out the words as a way to say that the future is always unclear, and that the positive outlook is not always true. I chose to make multiples because of the many possibilities life could take, and the vast number of people in the world.

Figure 26. Julianna Wells, *Planted and Cut*, 10 oil on panels, each 9" x 12" in, 2016.

In this series, I worked directly from life, and I observed the light on the individual plants. In these paintings, I wanted to create a mood of isolation, and refer back to the life cycle. Plants, like us, are fragile. The water and nutrients keep them alive, as does the sunlight. In some

cases, they keep living on after being cut or picked. In the same way, we like to believe we will live on after death. I see this as a metaphor for existence, each of us grows in our own individual patterns, and since we each go through versions of this process, we all have more in common than we think. To me, these paintings are meditations on what it means to be alive.

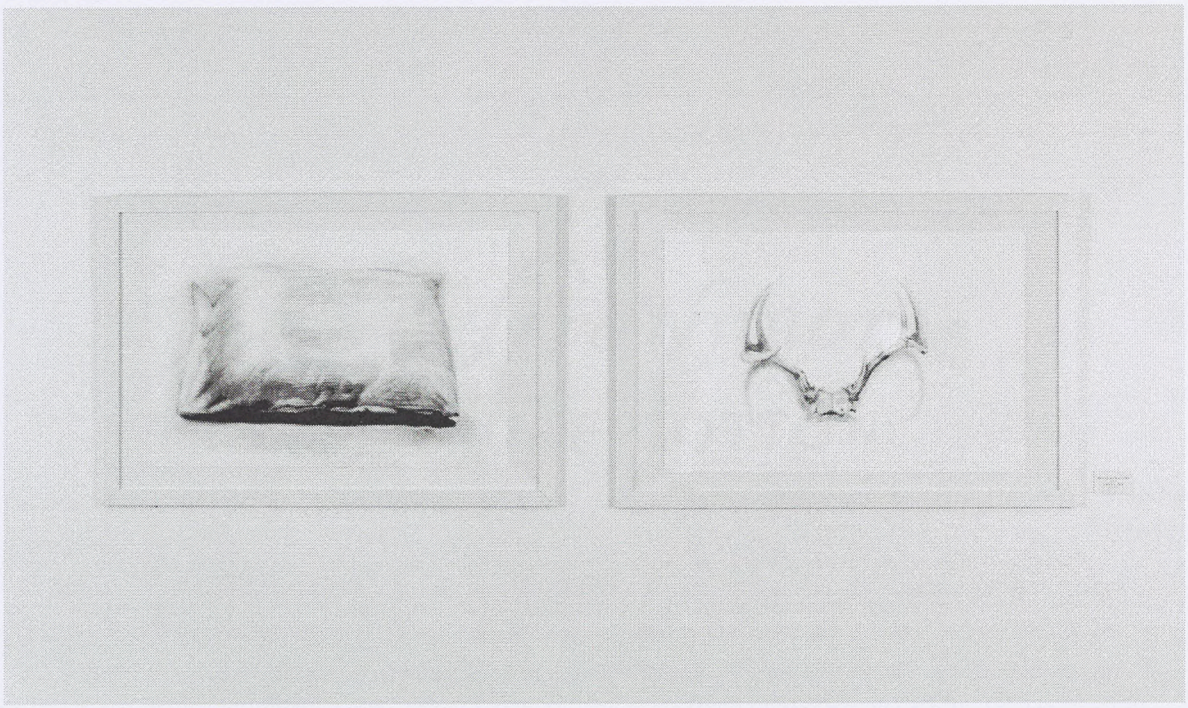

Figure 27. Julianna Wells, *Now I lay my Head to Rest*, graphite on paper, two 20" x 30" drawings, 2016.

In these drawings, I worked directly from life. I observed these objects for hours, depicting every characteristic that made them individual. I wanted to revere them. I drew the pillow because it is the place where my thoughts race the most. Both talk about a mental space, from the imprint of the head made on the pillow, to the empty space of the skull. Every night, I think of what it means to exist. The antlers on the right are the ones from when I found the deer carcass as a child, my first brush with the physical reality of death. I paired them together because they are like counterparts between the conscious and unconscious mind. For me, they question an uncomfortable topic. When we fall asleep, we are often conscious of falling asleep knowing we will wake in a few hours. In death, I often wonder if the mind is conscious of death

after it happens, or if we lose consciousness forever. This brings together many spiritual issues, and is one of the topics that keep me awake as I rest at night.

CONCLUSION

This senior thesis project pushed me to see my artwork from a new perspective. There are two accomplishments I gained from undertaking a solo exhibition. The first was being able to develop a cohesive body of work, and the second was being able to discuss the concepts that drive my work clearly. Not only does my art talk about fragility and mortality; I am describing how it feels to be alive. I also learned that my art has been about that for many years, but it was not until I reflected in depth that I came upon that realization.

Doing research on past and present artists helped me develop these realizations and concepts. Especially when looking at the work of Andrew Wyeth, Winslow Homer, Bo Bartlett, and Antonio Lopez Garcia, I felt that the relationship they all have between life and painting is very similar for me. It was also interesting to see how looking at their work so in depth impacted the aesthetics of my own work.

During the night of the opening and the week the show was up, it was so interesting to see how people interacted with the work. People of multiple backgrounds viewed the exhibition. Some people spent an hour looking at the paintings. Overall, everyone had a general sense of what was being said, and many told me it made them question their own beliefs about life as well as the future.

As I move forward, I want to take what I did in the still life paintings and apply these sentiments to landscapes, figures, and interiors. I believe that as the subjects become more complex, the more I will be able to discuss through my paintings what it feels like to be human.

Notes

1. Gerhard Richter, 'Notes 1985' in Hans-Ulrich Obrist ed., (*Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting, Writings,* 1962-1993), 119.

2. Jigdral Bdud-'joms, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism : Its Fundamentals and History*, (Sommerville, Ma: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 209.

3. John Parks, *Memory & Myth: The Paintings of Andrew Wyeth.* (*American Artist*, 2010), 1.

4. Seneca, "Seneca's Letters from a Stoic", trans. Richard M. Gummere (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2016), 250.

5. George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art.* (London & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 19.

6. Herbert Friedmann, *The Symbolic Goldfinch: Its History and Significance in European Devotional Art*, (Washington DC: Pantheon Books, 1946), 7.

7. Helen Gardner and Fred Kliener, "Gardner's Art Through The Ages: A Global History", (Boston, Ma: *Wadsworth Cengage Learning,* 2013), 695.

8. Frank Palmeri, "A Profusion of Dead Animals: Autocritique in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Gamepieces", (*Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 2016), 51.

9. Ibid., 53.

10. Walter Liedtke, "Still-Life Painting in Northern Europe, 1600-1800", (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), para. 4.

11. Gardner, "Gardner's Art Through The Ages: A Global History", 695.

12. Parks, *Memory & Myth: The Paintings of Andrew Wyeth*, 61.

13. Ibid., 63.

14. Andrew Wyeth and Richard Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth*, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 15.

15. Parks, *Memory & Myth: The Paintings of Andrew Wyeth*, 63.

16. Ken Chowder, *Winslow Homer, The Quintessential American Artist*, (*Smithsonian*, 1995), 116.

17. Chowder, *Winslow Homer, The Quintessential American Artist*, 116.

18. Cynthia Grenier, *Winslow Homer, All-American Artist, (World & I, 1996)*, 100.

19. John Wilmerding, "Winslow Homer's: Right and Left", (*Studies in the History of Art*, 1980), 59.

20. “Edward Hopper Master of Silence”, (*USA Today Magazine*, 2008), 34.

21. Jake Wien, *Rockwell Kent and Edward Hopper*, (*Magazine Antiques*, 2016), 184.

22. Ibid., 184.

23. Chowder, *Winslow Homer, The Quintessential American Artist*, 116.

24. Giobet, *Finding Inspiration in Ordinary Landscapes*, (*PSA Journal*, 2006), 23.

25. Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, (New York: Knopf, 1995), 460.

26. “Edward Hopper Master of Silence”, *USA Today Magazine*, 34.

27. David Houston, *Bo Bartlett: Selected Works*, (Scala, NY, 2016), 18.

28. León, D. S., "Antonio López García: una nueva concepción espacial del realismo", (*Estúdio*, 2015), 104.

29. Gardner, “Gardner's Art Through The Ages: A Global History”, 695.

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